CHAPTER 3

Silence and Violence: The world of the Subaltern in society and Literature.

This research naturally leads one to locate the position of women in the discourse (historiography, literature) produced in India before and after Independence. However, it is problematic to demarcate it by such a fixed line, as the process of emancipation started with the arrival of William Bentinck in India which has been discussed in this research at length. Thus, before Independence, we already have the beginning of women’s emancipation signaled by the banning of Sati Pratha by the timely intervention of Raja Rammohan Roy, William Bentinck and other social reformers. But in a post-colonial perspective, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak does not consider the intervention of the British as an initiation of Women’s emancipation, because according to her, the British too denied the subject position to the women. With this, the entire history, once written by the British, has come under close scrutiny and debate by the Subaltern studies group.

The ensuing post-colonial ambivalence resulted from this dislocation of the centre, has destabilized the linearity of history once written by the colonizers. With the emergence of post-colonial thinkers in the past century, attempts to write new histories have been underway; however, the post-colonial time has been no less a time of turmoil and chaos with different thinkers trying to situate their social, regional and national identities in the world (blurring the women question time and again), as Anne Norton puts it:
Postcolonial peoples are ambivalently historical. They are disposed to value history as a weapon and to fear it as a weapon that might be used against themselves. They are inclined to contest with their colonizers for mastery of that field; yet they are also inclined (having established themselves in that field) to doubt their mastery, knowing how much past imperial erasures and their present circumstances may conceal from them (Norton, *Ruling Memory* 459).

However, the histories which are thus being attempted to be written are produced by the elite people firstly. Secondly, these histories do not include the voices of the subalterns, because the histories of the subalterns are always episodic and fragmented as pointed out by Gramsci. Consequently, this issue has given rise to the subaltern representation challenged by Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” “For the (gender-unspecified) ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual solution is not to abstain from representation” (Spivak 32). Thus, the “postcolonial studies has emerged both as a meeting point and a battleground for variety of disciplines and theories” (L. Gandhi 3).

Like in all the once colonized nations, India is also trying to emerge and recreate a history of her own. While doing so, representation which plays a vital role, which both includes and excludes the marginalized section of the society, needs to be projected. But it is not possible to have one particular representation of India in one particular language or setup because of the plurality of the Indian state. Since India is made up of diverse cultures and communities, each region in India has her independent voice that needs to be represented. However, the image of the ‘periphery’ that is painted by the ‘centre’ has always been glossy and diminutive, like British’s
image of all colonized nations. In the case of Assamese identity too, it has been repeated. To use the Marxian phrase, history repeats itself, first as a tragedy and then as a farce. The farce has been repeated again and again in case of North-East India. Eminent historian H.K. Borpujari has sensed it, as cited by Subir Bhaumik:

> The policy-makers in Delhi utterly failed to realize that in a multi-racial and multilingual country, erection of linguistic states would unlock the Pandora’s Box and open up the floodgates of racism, linguism and parochialism. This has happened elsewhere in India and is now happening in the North East (Bhaumik 20).

The partition of India which has caused the isolation of the North-East region, already alienated under the colonial rule (S. Baruah 212), and the eventual glossing over the multi-cultural dimension by attempting to homogenize the regional disparity and the flicker of nationalism among those ethnic groups have given rise to a separate discourse which has never found a space in the Nationalist history written by the intellectual or political elites. The mass protests, growing subnationalism, and the literature all expose the angst of a subaltern community fighting for an identity.

Within the ambit of this discourse also comes the women question, i.e. the representation of the women as a part of this subaltern community, and as a subaltern class by itself. The representation of women in literature, and history by both male and female writers are to be studied to understand the trajectory of the schemes of women empowerment about which the government is very vocal these days.

When literature mirrors life, it reflects the inequalities and disparities that exist in those societies. Although laws are made to remove disparities, yet the androcentric approach to such law makes it ineffective and partial. This brings to mind the
statement made by Orwell in his *Animal Farm*, although in a different political context, but applicable to the present argument: “All animals were equal” which soon gives way to the condition when “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell 141). This happens when the laws are twisted to fit into the comfort zone of a selected few and also when laws are overlooked to serve the purpose of such people. And in this entire process there is always silence and violence involved in some or the other way. The silence of one group and the violence of the other or vice versa corresponds from the social structure we are living in, because the social structure by default demands for a hierarchy to be created. It is the inherent desire of Human beings to organise things, and in doing so the impulse to control and tame ‘self’ as well as ‘others’ become the guiding principle. More often than not one also tries to control and subdue the surroundings one is living in by manipulating the factors that operate in such society. For instance, the instance of child birth and female physiology allow men to take advantageous position by manipulation. Over all, it is also seen that women are mostly the victim of the circumstances in the society due to the androcentric nature of the society and social-structure originally designed and controlled by men.

For instance during the 13th century Thomas Aquinas in his book *Summa Theologica*, Question 92, Article 1, (S. T. Aquinas) defined women as “defective” and “misbegotten” and that woman is naturally subjected to man (Aquinas, 1947, p. 689). On the other hand, *The Old Testament* considers women as the perpetrator of all sins: “Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die?”; *The New Testament* preaches women to be submissive to men:
Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-24).

And warns women against speaking in public places:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (Corinthians 14:34-35).

This concept of misogyny had bereaved women for a long time in the west. In India too, we find women being dominated, battered, abused and treated as inferior to men. In Assam, when the debate on women’s education had been going on, at that time Ratneswar Mahanta (1864-1893) and Lambodar Bora not only opposed women’s education, they too vilified the image of women. Mahanta wrote in Jonaki that “All the biggest events in this world, all have happened because of women. Draupadi was at the bottom of Kurukshetra war, Sita of the Ram-Ravan war, and the cause of the famous Trojan War in Greece was Helen” (Mahanta 65). Mahanta even went to the extent of identifying such evil women in Assamese society in his series Asamat Man, where he identified Pijou Aideo, daughter of Badan Chandra Phukan, to be behind the massacre caused by Burmese invasion and in Moamaria Bidroh, Queen Phuleswari being responsible for Moamoria revolt(Mahanta 65). This exemplifies the attitude of educated male towards the women in the 19th century Assam. Since women could be evil incarnate, it became essential to define ‘ideal women’ as desired by men. This prejudice against women had further deteriorated their condition in the society. Sati
system had been abolished, female infanticide banned and government offering various reservations for the upliftment of women; but do these really help secure their place? Not unless we accept women as equal to man and abandon our prejudice by deconstructing the knowledge that comes from the grand narratives.

The concept of a grand narrative was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. The idea played upon is that the Narrative knowledge is the knowledge which is developed in the form of storytelling. In the past, knowledge was derived from myths and legends which not only explained, but made such knowledge authentic. These were at a later stage applied to the social relations of their own society; and the myths functioned as a legitimation of the existing power relations, customs and so on. Therefore for the emancipation of women this construct has to be reversed instead of improving on it.

The numerous instances of deprivation and violence against women form a part of the grand narrative which reversely percolates into our human consciousness and projects the women as the ‘other’. It is not only men who sees the women as ‘other’ but it is also the internalisation of androcentric nature of man by women, that some women also tend to see ‘other women’ as ‘other’. For instance in the Novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire Iralu, it is the grandmother who plays the role of the patriarchy in the absence of the male head of the family. In the Poem ‘Punishment’ Seamus Heaney becomes the artful voyeur and witnesses the revenge of the community which inflicts pain and violence on the ‘female’ by punishing for her adultery. This is a violent death given to a female by the society and forms a part of the tradition of death by lapidation. No one asks even for once the name of the co-adulterer/ her male counterpart and no punishment seems to be given to him. In his
fiction “Scarlet Letter”, Nathanial Hawthorn seems to be more lenient where ironically the priest Arthur Dimmesdale asks Hester Prynne the name of the father of her child Pearl. She not only refuses to tell the name in public but also wears the Scarlett Letter ‘A’ as a symbol of her sin. However, in the end Arthur Dimmesdale could not bear the burden of this sin anymore and accepts his guilt in front of the crowd that he is the father of Pearl. Whereas Hester Prynne prefers silence and the society meted out violence to the ‘flaxen haired girl’ in the poem *Punishment*: the bottom line is that the pain and suffering is always inflicted upon the female in each case.

Coming from fiction to real life instance, it would be pertinent to draw a parallel in this regard by citing two different instances from real life: One that of Soraya Manutchehri, the 35 year old Iranian lady who was stoned to death on false charges, and Second the Stoning of Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow, the 13 year old Somalian girl who was raped and in justice she got lapidation by the Islamic Courts union. They were silenced by Violence and the society turned a deaf ear to them.

In the essay “Can the subaltern Speak? Spivak cites the inability of the subaltern to speak, and she was relating to the suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri. The suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri is an instance of Violence inflicted on oneself because of the fact that there is no way of successful communication in the society and this is an instance that silence can be replaced by violence when speech fails. The bottom line is that the social structure is designed in such a way that it offers less scope to remove the inequalities or disparities. Although it may sound difficult but equality can be attempted by providing education and reforming laws which would empower women to remove the disparities. A new social order is to be created. There
is just one way to stop violence against women, that is by changing our ways of thinking and defining women; and unless we do that no law, no court, and no institution can emancipate women folk from being curbed and crushed again and again under male ego and atrocities.

United Nations Commissions for Europe defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” *(Assembly).*

Going by this definition, one can understand that anything that is an aggression against women whether physically, sexually, or psychologically occurring within the family, general community or the state can be considered as violence against women. Such deprivation or gender based discrimination is not new to our modern society, but it is the trail of an ancient anathema which positioned women as the weaker sex, as someone secondary and inferior to men. Equality cannot be achieved unless we accept women as equal to man and abandon our prejudice because women are competent, strong and equal to man in every respect.

History has ample instances of women who have accomplished, performed and exemplified mammoth enterprises no less than men. For instance, Enheduana, an Akkadian princess and high priestess at Ur, lived during 2285-2250 BC, her role is very significant in religious and political matters of the country *(Binkley, Enheduana).* This is almost 43 centuries ago from now; and since then till the present date we have numerous instances of women like Joan of Arc, Jhansi Ki Rani, or Indira Gandhi, or Kalpana Chawla, the list is long but exhaustible, occupying important positions in the
society and playing significant roles; however such instances, are sporadic and hence
do not establish that women received equal treatment like men in the society. This list
could have been longer only if they have not been subjugated for centuries. Women
have the same talent and merit, all they need is the favourable climate, social security,
and equal and indiscriminating opportunity like men to flourish. However, women
have always been neglected and considered as inferior to men.

On the whole, the essentialist view about women has put them on the verge of
this perilous state. The society needs to give a serious thought to eradicate all kinds of
violence against women, if it truly aspires to be a civilised society. The most
important step in this would be that women must cease to gratify man’s lust. They
must not make themselves the object to satisfy the male taste, but mould themselves
the way they feel about themselves. But the problem is that, women tend to think
about themselves the way men want to make them feel, and this spell must be broken.
After several reformations worldwide and in India, women in the 20th and 21st
century have been given equal rights and privileges like that of men; but despite of
this, women are still subjugated everywhere. In India, the violence towards women
have become a common episode due to gender discrimination, prevalence of dowry
system, lack of proper education, superstitious beliefs and for patriarchal order of
society. However, in matriarchal society too, the women do not enjoy all the
privileges like that of man. For instance, in Khasi community, the youngest daughter
in the family is the heir to the property, but she does not have the rights to dispose or
sell it without the consent of the maternal uncle (Majaw, Ranee and Rytathiang 11).
Violence against women in North-east India is less as compared to the rest of India
because the dowry system, child marriage and gender inequality have not penetrated
into the society till the past century. However, some recent investigations by several organizations reveal the fact that violence against women has been on the rise since the past few decades even in the north-east India.

Violence against women owes much to the prevailing conflict in the region. As a result severe restrictions are imposed on them in the name of safety. Alleged rapes by military personnel during the search operations has terrorized the locals to the extent that, the women are not allowed to go out alone even during the broad daylight. Alleged cases of rapes by the army personnel in different parts of North-East have occurred periodically, for example the most infamous rape and murder of Thangjam Manoroma Devi in Manipur (Srivastava), rape of a 12 year old girl Mamoni Koch in 1997 in Sonitpur district (Kalita), and many such other cases. Apart from rapes by military personnel, rapes of minors and young girls by the relatives, strangers and terrorists have also been noticed. The physical vulnerability of the women makes them vulnerable to ruffians and sex maniacs. Although most of these cases are registered, very few gets justice. This delay is either due to the flippancy of the government agencies, lack of evidences, and sometimes due to the shield provided by the organizations where the culprit works, as in the case of military organizations.

Since women are physically vulnerable and are married off after a certain age, many poor families do not wish to educate the girl child. In matter of education, the male child gets the first priority, and if the family is financially sound, the girl child enjoys schooling. It is particularly due to the traditional view that the girl child is only meant to bear the scion of lineage for the husband, and as such her role in her father’s house is temporary. The male child enjoys more privilege than the girl because he will extend the family line and he will also be the bread earner for the family. The story
does not end here; women are not only treated as burden by their families but are also tortured for dowry by their in-laws. Although violence for dowry is not common among all the communities in Assam, yet such cases are not unheard of. Dowry-related cases have increased from 1,307 in 2001 to 3063 in 2007 in Assam (Dowry cases treble in Assam in 7 years); and the Assam State Commission for Women has registered 134 dowry cases till today since 1994 (Reporter). Thus the gender roles play an important role in inflicting pain and subjugation of women. If we see today, women are working as much as boys in the corporate sector, in fields as labourers and everywhere else. The facts about women’s participation in the society have changed, but our prejudices still persist. After much tussle the government has locked women’s reservation at 33% (India), this is only but one step towards women’s emancipation.

With collective effort by the government, by the family and by every individual of the society, the discrimination against the women can be stopped. Educating the female child, social awareness programs, mostly in the villages and institutions to protect women’s right are some of the ways to eradicate violence against women. Instead of imposing the cultural stereo-typed roles for women, they should be given freedom to speak and choose what is good for themselves. The mindset, the social conventions and the stereo-typed images should be changed, otherwise we are bereaving ourselves inexorably from the great contribution by women every field of work, study and research. The women are to be brought out from their subaltern positions.
3.1 The concept of Subaltern:

The term subaltern has become relative and tends to accrue new meanings over the passage of time shaping the meandering discourse on subalternity. Whereas *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines subaltern as “an officer below the rank of captain, esp. a second lieutenant; of inferior rank; and particular, not universal”; David Ludden traces its genealogy to the late-medieval English whence it meant “vassals and peasants…” which by “1700 denoted lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origins, and in 1800 authors wrote from subaltern perspective” and in the 20th Century “Gramsci began to weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle…. and how the Subaltern Studies deployed some of Gramsci’s ideas at a critical juncture in historical studies” (Ludden 4-5). Stephen Morton points out that some critics are of the opinion that Gramsci used the term Subaltern as a code-word to refer to the Marxist proletariat; whereas others are of the opinion that it might be suggestive of the rural peasantry; and the Subaltern Studies use the term as a “name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Morton 96-97). Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak uses this term from her understanding gleaned from the works of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies and warns the critics of the pitfalls lest the terminology is applied indiscrteetly:

Everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie…The penultimate thing is (I want to say something about the work of the subalternist historians), many
people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most
dangerous. I mean, just by being in a discriminated-against minority on the
university campus, they don't need the word subaltern, and they don't need
Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the
subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the
discrimination are, and since they can speak, as they tell me—yes they can
speak—I quite agree, they're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece
of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic
discourse. They shouldn't call themselves subaltern and their main purpose
should not be to bloody Spivak”.

(G. C. Spivak, *Interview With Gayatri
Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa* 45-46)

Contesting Spivak’s contextual statement related to the suicide of
Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri that “the subaltern cannot speak”, Benita Parry charges Spivak
with being unable to hear the voice of the subaltern and suggests that Spivak’s work
stems from a “theory assigning an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse in
constituting and disarticulating the native” (Mongia 8). She further asserts that “it
should be possible to locate traces and testimony of women’s voice on those sites
where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs,
 artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak’s model of the silent subaltern”
(Mongia 8). Parry believes that the native voice can be traced in the colonist’s text and
agrees to Homi K Bhabha’s assertion that the Hybridity in the colonial text is because
the subaltern has already spoken (Parry). But this does not invalidate Spivak’s
observation that the subaltern cannot speak. If the subaltern’s voice has to be traced by
deconstructing the rich and ambivalent language of the imperialist, as pointed out by
Rey Chow, it further compels us to study the language of the imperialist which allows
gaps in its dominant culture to maintain its own equilibrium. Chow further points out Spivak’s central thesis hinges on the fact that “speaking” itself belongs to an already well-defined structure and history of domination (Chow 128). It is therefore obvious that if the subaltern can speak, they have already structured themselves and could be dominant factor in the history. To quote Spivak: “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore” (G. C. Spivak, *The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic* 158). So what one has, is not a coherent speech of the subaltern but passive sporadic occasions of resistance not forming a part of any discourse.

If the world is a world of inequality and much of the difference falls across the border division between the people of the west and the non-west considering it at a macro level\(^1\); the same theory may be applied at the micro level to understand how this difference also operates within the non-west nation states thereby creating a prototype of the condition at the macro level. The existing difference between the centre and the margin, the exploiter and the exploited, the colonizer and the colonized give us a view of the power dynamics at the macro level, however the difference between these two opposite forces also exist within each system; hence it would be erroneous to say that the west is the dominant force and the non-west is the ‘subservient other’ because the ‘dominant’ and the ‘subservient’ also exists within these forces as well. To say that the Europe or West is the dominant force and to regard the non-west or nation like India as a counter force is the half truth because what of European nations like Czech Republic, Iceland and Poland in relation to dominant forces within Europe and what of territories like North-east India within India, where exists concepts of sub-nationalism within the Indian nation? The belligerent forces within the western
powers and also within the non-west or a nation like India offer a scope to understand that how the power dynamics and the inherent nature of oppression lies within the independent power structures as well. In this sense the non-western nations duplicate the power hierarchies and differences that exist between the west and non-west nations. Debjani Ganguly raises a very pertinent question in her forward to the *Subaltern Vision: A Study in Postcolonial Indian English Text*: “What remains of the philosophical force of radical alterity when almost any label of identity can be staged as ‘subaltern’ relative to what it is compared?” (Ed. Aparajita De) The changing contour of subalternity destabilizes any fixed definition of the term and has posed a difficulty because of the debate among the intellectuals who tend to fit the word in their contextual usage. Who is the subaltern? Who are these people? Milan Kundera in his ‘The Curtain’ cites an instance:

...at Munich, in the Autumn of 1938, the four great nations, Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain, negotiated the fate of a small country to whom they denied the very right to speak. In a room apart the two Czech diplomats waited all night to be led, the next morning, down long hallways into a room where Chamberlain and Daladier, weary, blasé, yawning, informed them of the death sentence (Kundera 32).

Are they subalterns then? Or are they those people who were never represented, whose existence is required only in the sense of the ‘otherness’? Or are they the people whose existence have been ignored and their presence overlooked. Of all these contradictory and conflicting observation on subalternity of a group, one can safely assert that the subaltern is not organized, has not spoken except sporadic occasion of resistance, and its existence in the ‘gaps’ is non-representation. In this
sense the subaltern can be one person, a class of people, a community, a whole nation or to use the ‘colonial word’, a whole race.

When a group of people laden with power and blind with prejudice, who discusses and decides the fate of a piece of land but ignores the people who inhabit it, then the latter is the subaltern; When a group of people defines the role of the ‘other’ and justifies their existence as subservient, then the latter is a subaltern and it is in this context, this proposed study would like to discuss the representation of Women, the subaltern and marginalized voices from the North-eastern part of India. But before the issue which has to be discussed there are some other issues which are to be addressed. What is North-east India? Who lives in the North-east India and the reasons of its changing demography? Once these issues are discussed and the corresponding questions related to these issues addressed, one can move to the main issue cited above.

Not soliciting the unification of fractured territorial and border disputes of the North-east region of India as enforced by some social thinkers to blur the differences and ethnic identities by homogenizing the different colors with a common hue it will be pertinent to identify and crystallize the actual differences so that these states may come out of the colonial sway to form their identity in the ‘post’-colonial chaos. The superimposed notion of homogenising the ‘other’ under one umbrella as attempted by the British could be well understood as a prejudice under their colonial project, and from whose whirlwind the elite class separated themselves but only to whiten themselves and differentiate from the ironically ‘uncivilised’ Indians. In doing so, they forge an affinity with their masters by accepting their culture, language and ideologies. Not much has changed since the end of the ‘raj’, as the ideologies that was
framed by the colonizers have been transferred as legacy to the rightful owner, the sidekicks, who betrayed their own culture (contrary to the restoration they wanted) and espoused western culture, power and education. Truly, history repeats itself, first as a tragedy then as a farce\textsuperscript{13}. Now the farce is that the idea of nationalism that had been forged to counter the colonial forces seems to deconstruct itself. The concept of nationalism was garnered off the unassailable crystallized classes which temporarily saw its liberation in unification. But this artificial conglomeration soon gave way to dissension owing to internal conflicts immediately after the attainment of independence. Terry Eagleton rightly observes,

\begin{quote}
It is true that revolutionary nationalists had in a sense looked beyond class themselves. By rallying the national people, they could forge a spurious unity out of conflicting class interests. The middle classes had rather more to gain from national independence than hard-pressed workers and peasants, who would simply find themselves presented with a native rather than a foreign set of exploiters (Eagleton 10).
\end{quote}

Therefore a common signification of nationalism for the diverse communities of India would be erroneous. The post-colonial ambivalence has destabilized the linearity of history once written by the colonizers. With the emergence of post-colonial thinkers in the past century, attempts to write new histories have been underway; however, the post-colonial time has been no less a time of turmoil and chaos with different thinkers trying to situate their social, regional and national identities in the world. While doing so, representation plays a vital role which both includes (in the gaps) and excludes (deliberately always) the marginalized section of the society that needs to be projected. Consequently, this issue has given rise to the
subaltern representation challenged by Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” “For the (gender-unspecified) ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (G. C. Spivak 32). Thus the “postcolonial studies has emerged both as a meeting point and a battleground for variety of disciplines and theories” (L. Gandhi 3). Like in all the once colonized nations, India is also trying to emerge and recreate a history of her own. But it is not possible to have one particular representation of India in one particular language or setup. Since India is made up of diverse cultures and communities, each region in India has her independent voice that needs to be represented.

One community cannot speak for another, nor can it represent the other. In much the same way, neither can Spivak or Mistry, Ghosh or Roy be the representative of Indian writing in English. Nor is India what Naipaul says in his travelogues. If the world tries to figure out Indian life from the works of the above mentioned writers, it would be equally erroneous. There is a whole body of writers publicized and others not-publicized and it is the composite of the two that would make the gamut of Indian writing in English. In much the same way when we use the term ‘North-east India’ in homogenizing the rich and diverse ethnic experiences, we tend to overlook the diversity that lurks beneath it. As Terry Eagleton opines, “Language levels things down. It is normative all the way down. To say ‘leaf’ implies that two incomparably different bits of vegetable matter are one and the same. To say ‘here’ homogenizes all sort of richly diverse places” (Eagleton 14).

So despite of the inflicted sameness, we will have to look for the difference. However before doing this, an analysis of the historical myopia that caused the British
to see this part of India as a frontier of Bengal has to be corrected. Alexander Mackenzie in his ‘History of the relations of the Government with the Hill tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal’ writes thus:

The north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges…… Before attempting to record the dealings of the government with the numerous savage races of this portion of its dominions, it may be well very briefly to refer to the events which led up to the occupation of the Assam by the British, and to give some general idea of the state of that province when we first entered it (Mackenzie 1)

The ‘North-east’ of India, which while unexplored was seen as a remote land - the land of ‘savage race’ -by a colonial mind. It is difficult to assert here whether Mackenzie used the word ‘Savage’ to denote his unintelligibility of the culture of these races, or just because he presumed all ‘other’ races to be savage which they wanted to ‘civilize’. Or it is as Robert J.C. Young points out:

Colonial and imperial rule was legitimised by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves (despite having done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the paternal rule of the west for their own best interests (today they are deemed to require ‘development’). The basis of such anthropological theories was the concept of race (Young 2).
Whatever it is, this part of the world was projected by the administrators as backward, remote and savagely to the rest of the world and the British took all pains to humanize these races\textsuperscript{14}. Later on we would see the mainland India repeating the mistake. What more can be expected when an outsider is speaking of people, culture and race which their limited rationality could not comprehend. Such colonial observation, explanation and supposition are now being challenged and new histories are being written. Sir Edward Gait also commits the same mistake like that of his predecessors when he commented:

The Ahoms have abandoned their tribal dialect in favour of Assamese, and Rabhas and Kacharies and other tribes are following their example. The reason in this case is partly that Assamese is the language of the priests, who are gradually bringing the rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism, and partly it is the language of the higher civilization……. It may safely be assumed that one or other, or both, of these processes has always been in operation, and that, just as Assamese is now supplanting Kachari and other tribal languages, so these in their turn displaced those of an earlier generation (Gait 1)

Now, one would need to have the same sensibility to understand these suppositions of Sir Gait. The British who did so much for the restoration of Assamese Language to save it from the ignominious designs of the Bengali babus, and helped the khasis to use the roman script instead of the Bengali script, did nothing or very less for the restoration of these tribal languages by forecasting a death knell in the form of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Thus the British gave them a Script, a language, some culture, a religion and a concept of ‘Civilized people’ which has become the yard stick to measure how civilized they have become as compared to the British.
The Missionary project, whatever its intention, forged a bond between growing sections of the hill people in the secluded North-east and, by extension, the Raj. In turn, as cited by Mazumder, “Garos think Christianity and education together. After a child gets into a school, he is regarded as a Christian even by his Songsarek (non-Christian) parents”. Much later, religion, together with other symbols, would be used by certain North-east tribal communities to differentiate themselves from the more powerful, sophisticated and developed “other”. (Verghese 23)

The invisible frontiers are more dangerous than the visible frontiers. The extension of the visible frontiers can be checked and policed, but the invisible frontiers seep into human conscience through religious, linguistic and cultural pores. The present day situation is however different and each and every tribal community seeks to map their origin, literature and language in order to secure their identity and land, the former is firmly rooted in the latter (As we shall see later Sanjay Hazarika explains in his book ‘The Rites of Passage’ about the plight of the Motoks, the formation of ULFA and the Assam agitation).

Before the coming of the British, these hilly tracts have been ruled by tribal groups which lived in close proximity to each other. However, after the British occupation of Assam since the Treaty of Yandaboo, all the other states have gradually subsumed within the territory of Assam which comprises of the present day Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh and the erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Recently, the state of Sikkim is included under the umbrella of North-east region owing to its proximity to the area. The fate of these states is sealed by Bureaucrats and Political leaders. They decide the future course of action on behalf of all the people who have been residing in this region for several
centuries which of course caused sufficient dissatisfaction to its populace. The dissension lies not alone in the idea of nationalism that is hurled upon people of this region, but also from a sense of loss, betrayal and exploitation. This has also led to the formation of the insurgent groups like NSCN and ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom). The archived version of the website floated by ULFA maintains that the British has tricked the people of Assam by retracting on the treaty of Yandaboo\(^\text{16}\).

Further, an ULFA Publication explains:

If Assam would have been an independent country then we would have brought (about) progressive change by means of agitation or elections. But in the present context, if we agitate or participate in parliamentary politics then the government formed by us (will) have to work as per the Constitution of India and Guidelines fixed by the Government…. This system is prone to exploitation and corruption. This is proved by the gradual change in phase from the (All Assam) Students Union to the (Assam) Gana Parishad…. Therefore to create an exploitation-free society, our next step (must) be a national war of liberation…. We have no alternative to armed revolution.

(Verghese 57)

As a matter of fact the founders of ULFA are of the Muttock origin who have been in the past deprived of the land holdings by the British\(^\text{17}\). The NSCN\(^\text{18}\) (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), and other insurgent groups like PLA (People's Liberation Army) of Manipur and NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) also operate with a similar ambition and sovereignty tops the list of their objectives.

The Naga club told the Simon Commission that “we never asked for any reforms and we do not wish for any reforms.” The Nagas claim never to have been conquered by Indians ever. Their language was quite different from that
of the plains and their people had ‘no social affinities with the Hindus or Mussalmans’.
If the British were to withdraw, they should not be left to the mercy of others but left
alone “to determine ourselves as in ancient times”.
(Verghese 31)

These rebel groups either want independence from India, or want a separate state because they feel their identity and culture are being threatened and surrounding culture of the larger population would assimilate them one day. Further, the demographic change of this region after the coming for the British is also noteworthy. A huge chunk of Caucasian population has migrated and infiltrated this region from the neighboring states and countries, and the Bengalis (Both Hindu and Muslim) top the list. Sanjoy Hazarika critically analyses the present day scenario in this Book “Rites of Passage”. This influx of foreign population seems to be strategic because it gives the opportunity to the centre to refuse sovereignty to these frontier states because of the presence of huge non-tribal heterogeneous population.

If we are talking about migration in general, then it is a universal phenomenon, as people have been migrating all over the world since the beginning of mankind. But if we are talking about the Bangladeshi Syndrome then it is a very recent phenomenon. UK, USA, and Europe are also afflicted by this syndrome. In Assam, the migration from East India, i.e. of the Bengalis (both Muslim and Hindu) became noticeable in 1936 which began as a part of systematic colonisation by the British in 1928 (S. Hazarika 72). Between 1921 to 1931, the Bengali population increased from 3 lakhs to 5 lakhs and were occupying 37.7% of the land in Nowgong district by 1936 (S. Hazarika 72). The first recorded official immigration was in 1921 from East Bengal to Goalpara; but within 10 years there were 5 lakhs of them (S. Hazarika 73).
Adding to the woe of the local people, Mohammad Saadulla’s party announced land Settlement policy in 1941 that allowed the immigrants to settle on government land anywhere in Assam and seize 30 bighas of land each and more for homestead. Four years later, Saadulla boasted in a letter to Liaquat Ali Khan, then Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s Chief aide and later Premier of Pakistan that, ‘In the four lower districts of Assam valley, these Bengali immigrant Muslims have quadrupled the Muslim population during the last 20 years’ (S. Hazarika 73-74). If the population grows by leaps and bounds to the extent that an ordinary mind languishes to calculate and a rational mind fails to discern when suddenly confronted by the overwhelming numbers, then what could be the consequences?

The consequences were seen at Nellie in 1983 which became the simmering cauldron of ethnic riot to establish the right to one’s identity by disposing the aliens. This eruption of violence was nurtured by the dispossession of lands from the control of Ahoms, Motoks, Tiwas, Bodos and other tribes. Land is synonymous with identity. When one’s identity is at stake, there are episodes of violence and bloodshed. The real culprits, according to the police officials were the Land Revenue Officers who took bribes to pass over the lands illegally. The government too acted hand in glove which infuriated the local people to the extent that a slightest provocation is sufficient to start a full-fledged war. As the population density increased, and land shortage became apparent, so did the race for jobs and business, in Assam. In 1980s there were 40,00,000 (S. Hazarika, *Rites of Passage* 26) illegal immigrants in Assam as claimed by the Assam Agitation leaders, and later in 1998 Governor S. K Sinha revealed that there are not less than 1 crore 40 lakhs of migrants in India altogether (S. Hazarika, *Rites of Passage* 228).
The increase in Caucasian population has saturated the local population to the extent that it is difficult to have a consensus about the sovereignty of this region as a whole or state-wise. This further took a different turn towards the vote bank politics. Who is the subaltern then? The agitators like Prafulla Mahanta who took to politics; or the rebels who eventually surrendered to Indian forces and is now busy in contracts and syndicates, or the anti-talk faction who continues to live in the neighbouring countries, or the religious and linguistic minority, or the ones who are waiting for the ‘independence’? This is the deferred dream of the subaltern.

A Historical or political or economical or geographical survey is not the aim of this research, but any research will also be incomplete if the factors that have led to or have conditioned the growth of the literature of a particular group of people from a particular region whose lives are so affected by all the above mentioned factors are not taken into consideration. The literature of this region discusses not only the ‘women question of emancipation’ but also the turbulence that has gripped the entire North-eastern states of India. If literature is the mirror of society, then the contemporary writings in English from this region mirror some of the most recurrent issues. Tilottama Misra in her Introduction to ‘The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India’ claims that “Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be never-ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt ‘to live with it’, as they are expected to do by the distance centres of power” (Aier xix). Whereas, Temsula Ao subtitles her ‘These Hills Called Homes’ as “stories from war zone”; The Oxford University Press, New Delhi has published two recent anthologies, edited by Tilottoma Misra, which introduces the books as from “region marred by decades of violence”. Some of the writings are generated by such false
hopes and promises which have lured the region to open up only to be looted by the tides of corruption. False promises by political leaders, corruption by the bureaucrats, middleman, political touts and political leaders, merchants and local thugs have not only slowed down the process of development but also deprived the people of their rights and privileges. In one of her speech delivered in 1980, Indira Gandhi exhorts the leaders from North-east region, “We also want you to get greater benefit from your coal reserves”. She further says, “In spite of the year long agitation, the blockade of oil and timber going out of the state and disruption of the administrative machinery, the government was able to ensure adequate supplies of essential commodities to the people of the region…. It is ironical that there should be scarcity of petroleum products in the North-East.” (I. Gandhi 235-236) It is indeed ironical, but not in the sense of Mrs. Gandhi. The land, different places in Arunachal Pradesh, where the Indo-China war was fought more than 50 years ago lacks in the basic medical and education facility even today as pointed out by Mrinal Talukdar in his book 1952. The recent leak in the allocation of the Coal-gates, and the rise of Mafia that controls the resources are sufficient proof to point out the bamboozling predilection (sustenance of Congress-I) of Mrs. Gandhi. The price of essential commodities and the price of fuel are much higher in the north-east, especially in Manipur.

Indira Gandhi further says,

In our system, the states are distinct units and each has its problems, but a regional approach helps each unit to solve its problems better. Even in the international sphere the regional approach is now being welcomed. Every one of the states and Union Territories of our North-East has its own personality; yet, there is a family resemblance among them. That is why the expression
‘seven sisters’ come to be applied to them. The rest of the country holds the seven sisters in special affection (I. Gandhi 233-234).

The problem with a nation like India is that it strives to achieve a goal set in accordance to the global standards of progress that emanates from the weltanschauung of Western Minds (Europe and America) resulting in incompatibility when applied in local context because of the differences in culture and mindset. This dichotomy creates a tension between opposite forces which undermines the various stages of progress that is required to realize the final step towards the realization of that goal. The process of evolution is fundamental to all living beings and is also applicable to societies. If this process of evolution is short-circuited, the climax would be the creation of a Frankenstein.

It can safely be asserted that the turmoil that has turned the North-eastern India into a cauldron of discontentment and violence is a historical fallacy to homogenize the ethnic identities into one and subsequently to force the idea of Nationalism in order to control the resources and political arena of the entire nation.

Having said this, one can see how the north-eastern indigenous population can be considered as subaltern. The women who have been denied voice and representation, and the people who have been deprived of their legitimate rights and lands are the subaltern people in this region. Most of the novels written in English in North-East India have those subaltern characters and the issues related to them. However, they do not get a proper representation.

Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* presents the ULFA as the MOFEH, and the students’ agitation is symbolic of the ASSU agitation in the 1970s. The background of the novel and the climax is influenced by the perpetual violence that is
present throughout the novel. While she is trying to show the decadence of the administration and the worthlessness of the lower cadres of Police, she fails to portray the subaltern voice in a proper way. The subaltern exists only as a shadow in her novel. Readers just get the idea that many young boys join the MOFEH (one sees how they are killed towards the end of the novel owing to their inexperience), and some of them are from the tribal communities as we come to know from Rukmini’s driver, when he reveals his identity (Phukan 273). The women presented in the novels in no way represent the subaltern women; but the identity crisis and social upheaval caused by the illegal immigration finds some expression:

Foreign nationals. True, they were a strong presence in the district, in the entire state, in fact. And it was also probably true they were still coming into the country in large numbers. After all, why shouldn’t they? The security forces who were supposed to stop them at the border preferred to line their pockets with hush money, and look the other way when the men, women and children from across the border entered. (Phukan 88)

Phukan’s observation is not a deviation from what Sanjoy Hazarika has observed in his *Rites of Passage*. Phukan mentions the wretched mother of the boy who has been killed in fake encounter\(^4\), the failure of the leaders to ensure development and progress\(^5\), the condition of the college going girls who are putting their life and future at stake and many more such issues find a mention in the novel. Anjum Hasan too talks about the growing disparity between the locals and non-tribal, the identity crisis issue, the place of a woman in a post colonial society and such other issues in her novel. Easterine K. Iralu and Mamang Dai also expose the issues related
to violence, militancy, atrocity by the army, the illegal immigration, and subjugation of women in their works which is discussed in subsequent chapters.
3.2 The gimmick of subaltern representation.

Language is Power, and English is definitely a powerful language because the original user of this language has ruled a vast chunk of the world, and has left this language as a legacy for them. Not going for digression, the point to be made here is that the position that English has taken, and under the circumstances which it has taken its position, is worth a scrutiny because it will help us to understand the way I want to use the ‘otherness’ of the oriental language which needs to be civilized by English. Be it language or the knowledge transmitted through that language- and both complement each other by enriching each other – has claimed supremacy when pitted against Indian languages in the Indian soil, like French has been the language of aristocracy and the ruling class, often sought after, in England since the Norman conquest. In India too English has been established with much of masculine gusto, and Sanskrit and Persian and their ancillaries have been dismissed as ‘other’ imperfect, not fit language to carry valuable information, feminine, weak, and all vices that Europe tried to project. It is difficult to say whether this has been the display of ignorance on their part, or the arrogance or the Freudian problem of projection. I propose to argue here that the language which has successfully established its roots in the Indian soil, is like the huge banyan tree, which has roots in many soils, wherever the British carried them, and now nourishing the tree with the locale hue and giving a new shape to the ever growing language. There is no possibility of English being rejected now, so the merit lies in making one’s own writing skill adept to the contours of the language. Salman Rushdie\textsuperscript{26} and Aijaz Ahmed\textsuperscript{27} both acknowledge the inevitability of the English language as a medium of expression in India and the use of it by the Indian
writers for whatever reasons. Raja Rao talks about the problem in his introduction to *Kanthapura* too, but he has no other alternate. The language has been sufficiently chutnified now that it will suit to the Indian taste. Having said this, the next issue which arises is how the subaltern (women in entirety since antiquity) can express themselves in this language. Or for that matter, how can someone represent the subaltern in the literature produced in this language? Can women be allowed to handle this power (language)?

Written literature has been unknown in many parts of this region until the past century as has been discussed in the previous chapters. The only form of literature that existed is the folklores. Myths constitute an important part of the folk tradition. These myths are orally transmitted and they have no ownership, so they are open to omission and commission. It is also difficult to say whether these myths have been created by the men or the women but their overall structure and meaning indicates that women have already been objectified as the ‘other’. As most of these myths are preposterous, some of the myths are also unscientific explanations of the cause-effect relationship that these people have seen around them. As Moushumi Kandali says, “Narratives both in the primitive and modern contents, tend to resolve individual’s/society’s deepest tensions. They may concern social conflicts, ritual taboos, or man’s struggle to come to terms with his physical environment” (Kandali 135). Most of the tribal people have had no written script and hence they do not have written literature. These myths just existed orally, but now they are being written down for preservation as most of the tribal people have accepted the Roman, Assamese, Bengali, Devanagari scripts for this purpose. There are myths regarding the absence of written scripts which have been cited by the folklorist Bhabendranath Dutta in is essay, the North-
East and its Socio-Cultural Milieu. For the sake of convenience, only one or two tribes from each of the eight states will be included in this research.

In Mizo society, the woman is a prized possession. Of the many tribes that inhabited the Lushai hills, most tribes wanted to possess as many women as they can. Thomas Herbert Lewin in his book *Wild Races of South Eastern India* writes, “Among all hill people the woman is the hardest worker, the chief toiler. And naturally enough their constant and incessant labour in all weathers kills the woman of a tribe, or renders them more liable to insidious attacks of disease. (Lewin 92)” Lewin is of the opinion that one or two tribes like ‘Khyoungtha’ and ‘Shendoo’ places the women in the same social scale as that of their male counterparts, however this is debatable from the stories that prevail in the Mizo Folklore. There is another tribe called Toungtha where keeping concubines has been considered disgraceful, even women slaves are not sexually exploited according to Lewin. The Mizos started using the Roman script after the coming of the British, like the Nagas and the Khasis. However, their written record of literature is very scanty and the bulk of the literature is constituted of the rich oral folk songs and narratives. But unlike in most oral traditions, the source of the folksongs are traceable, as Margaret Ch. Zama puts it, “...the original composer of these folk songs are identified, and happen to be women, and the later songs composed in the same tradition continued to bear their names (Zama 207).” These stories reveal the stark reality of the numerous atrocities and oppression meted out to the women folk in Mizo tribes. These narratives challenge the social hierarchies or power grids that are controlled by the male or by some absolute chief who rules the seat of power. The story of Pi Hmuaki Zai reveals that the biasness of the male members of the society. The story goes that she has been buried alive because she is
the first known composer among Mizos; and her people have been afraid that with her imaginative power that enables her to compose songs and legends, she will “finish composing all the songs and leave nothing for posterity (Zama 207)”

This situation is analogous to Tagore’s short story Khata that has been discussed elsewhere in this research. The point is, since language is a power, it has been seen as a threat whenever women have come to possess the strength of language. Simone De Beauvoir cites Lady Winchilsea’s position:

At the end of the seventeenth century, Lady Winchilsea, a childless noblewoman, attempts the feat of writing; some passages of her work show she had a sensitive and poetic nature; but she was consumed by hatred, anger and fear:

Alas! A woman that attempts the pen,

Such an intruder on the rights of men,

Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,

The fault can by no virtue be redeemed. (Beauvoir, The Second Sex 124)

In Europe, writing has been a taboo for women; in Mizo society when writing has not been in vogue, speaking/narrating/composing has also been a taboo as can be seen from the folktale.

In another folksong, that reveals the social hierarchy and inequality for which the female suffers, Laltheri, the female protagonist strips herself naked and refuses to eat as a sign of protest against her family. The baring of the female has been used as a powerful weapon by women many a times to shame the male dominated world30.
Another story, *Darpaungi Zai* is also composed by a female and sings of “the injustice she suffered under her chief (Zama 208).

Mizo writing in English is still at its infancy, as most of the literature that has been produced is in Mizo language. The first Mizo novel is *Hawilopari (1936)* by Biakliana which has been published posthumously after 1950\(^3\). The novel deals with the women issue, the problem of stepmother (which is also available in Mizo folklore), and the domination of the chieftain (a symbol of patriarchal domination). The novel is about the fight of a woman against the patriarchal system of the society much worsened by the greed of a stepmother\(^2\). The first Mizo novel comes in the year 2013. It is a teenager novel by Suzanne Sangi and titled *Facebook Phantom*, published by Duckbill, and the second novel is *Jo's Journal* authored by Sarah Aineh and published in the year 2014 by Notion Press. The third English novel is *Zorami* by Malsawmi Jacob published in 2014. The novel deals with Mizo history and the insurgency for separatism that has rocked the region in 1966. Interestingly, all these writings are by the female authors. Despite the glitch against women that is apparent from the folk tales, the Mizo women have made it better and are now cutting a niche with their discursive voices. They are the more empowered among the patriarchal society with the second highest literacy rate in India, and substantial female literacy among them (Zama 213). The tradition that has been started by *Pi Hmuaki Zai* seems to continue, and the woman cannot be silenced.

Among the Nagas, it is not much better. Temsula Ao, in her essay entitled *Gender and Power*, narrates the four mythological characters that are celebrated in Ao-Naga folklore. Ao maintains that like the other Naga tribes, the Ao-Nagas are also a “patriarchal society where the male wields power in all spheres of life”. There are
many women-centered narratives in Ao-Naga folklore where women characters are shown as dominant and power-wielding which is:

…reversal of traditional power structure based on gender… In actual reality, in this society, women are considered to be of little or no significance in matters relating to the origin, history and civil life of the people. But in fictive reality of these narratives, women have been portrayed as re-appropriating the powers that men actually wield in real life. (Ao, *Gender and Power* 18-23).

Of the four mythological stories, Longkongla and Yajangla are shown to possess supernatural power. The male are shown as victims of their wrath. Whereas in the story of Akangla she is praised for her wit and tactics, the real heroes who fight the war are the male members of the clan. In the last story, which has no name, is popular among the Ao-Naga people because of woman’s “power over man because of sex (Ao, *Gender and Power* 21).” The Naga women have been depicted in the myths as the possessor of supernatural powers or as very wise. Despite of having supernatural powers or being wise, the myths have a peculiar patriarchal or male dominating position, the male presence in the myths are very strong. These women are depicted as mystic, secretive, dark, conceited and cunning. They either employ their supernatural powers to solve a problem or make use of their sexual power over men to get a safe passage. Obviously the readers can very well understand the implications that, like in every other literature, women are considered as the cause of all mischief and trouble. They are always been portrayed, even in tribal myths, as the treacherous one or the one with magical powers. The Ao society has had no influence of the Manuscript, however, one of Manu’s laws says that: “It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company
of the females (Saraswati 207).” Quite clearly the woman does not occupy the subject position. They are the creation of male imagination: fictitious, and subversive to the existence of woman as an individual. The women become an ideology (a product of male ideology) pregnant with immense power with which she can sway over the male. So this power is not only to be chained but also to be kept in control under male supervision. Thus the power of women turns to be her weakness, her charm turns to be her chains as Monique Plaza observes, “Women always experiment at certain moments in their life with the view that felinity is a pretence. This garment that they must don often transforms itself into an unbearable shell.” (Plaza) This is an oppression of women under the social system that exists among the Ao Naga.

The Khasis have a matrilineal society. The ownership of the land goes to the youngest daughter in the family, and the maternal uncle is the real guardian, without whose consent, nothing can be decided. This has caused some difficulties in the society, as it does not allow complete patriarchal domination in the absence of land rights. And because of this reasons, there have been certain alteration in the social structure as pointed out by Patricia Mukhim. Moreover, women are only titular heads, the actual bread earner is the male. In case of divorces, and abandonment by the partner, the children have to dropout from the schools, and the mothers find it very difficult to support the family. This is the real scenario of the Khasi society. However, the Khasi folktales present the women in a better way. Esther Syiem traces gender relationship in the folktales. She cites the tale of Ka Nam to illustrate the interplay of dominance and subjugation that is covertly present in the Khasi society. The story presents the survival skills of the Khasi women in the face of all adversity and threat they face from the opposite sex. The first threat comes from the tiger who promises a
free wager of fruits to the lady in case she gives birth to a male child, whereas if she
begets a female then it has to be given as a food to the tiger. A girl child is born but
the lady succeeds in deceiving the tiger for some time. Later on the girl is kidnapped
by the tiger and as she matures, and the tiger plans to eat her, she is helped by a rat to
escape to the sun wearing a frog’s skin. Once the son of Sun discovers the beautiful
girl, he burns down the artificial skin and the lady has to marry him. Syiem is of the
opinion that, “the marriage that takes place at the end of the story may be understood
to be the final vindication for the aggrieved one, but for the contemporary woman,
marriage no longer becomes the desired end (Syiem 135).”

Thus, we can see in the novel Lunatic in My head, the Khasi women are not
much bothered about marriage and patriarchal domination. They are quite free and
independent in comparison to their non-Tribal counterparts. Nevertheless, the society
belongs more to the male. In Meghalaya, the Garos and the Jaintias also follow the
matrilineal system. Anjan Jyoti Borah observes that like the Khasi, the Garo women
are only a nominal head and she cannot do anything without the permission of the
husband. Further they do not play any role in the codification of the law. Dr. Borah
maintains, “There are some customary laws like the law of A. Kim and Dokchapa
which makes the way for subjugation of women (Borah).” These laws are related to
marriage and the women are never free to choose an independent life of her own. Dr.
Borah further states that “With regard to judicial system, women cannot be a member
of the jury, but she has a right to be heard. A woman has just to look after the family
as a mother and sister. There is a common saying in Khasi, “Haba la kynih ka iar
kynthei la wai ka pyrthei,” meaning “when the hen crows, it will be the end of the
world or world will be in ruin.” This signifies that women cannot speak like man nor
should she. The Khasi society also does now allow the women to speak- they want women to be silent.

The history of Manipur seems to be one of plunder and spoil as narrated precisely with xenophobic vehemence by Thingnam Kishan Singh in his essay *Encounters and Literary Engagements*. Singh explains that the Manipuri literature has gone through three successive stages and that has done a great damage to the indigenous literature that has been flourishing till the coming of the Bengali saint to Manipur in 1709 and the ascension of Pamheiba aka Maharaja Garibniwaz to the throne (T. K. Singh). Singh attributes the destruction of Manipuri culture, literature and script to Garibniwaj and the Bengali Vaishnavite Shantidas Goswami: “Along with the imposition of Hinduism, the Manuscripts and texts in the indigenous script were confiscated and burnt in full public view officially sanctioned events known as the Puya Meithaba (T. K. Singh 148).” Therefore many works which are extant are the anonymous production of the “repressed and marginalized”, for the fear of prosecution as literary and cultural practice in previous tradition has been barred with royal decree. With the cultural transaction, Manipuri literature has seen a new phase till they have come into contact with the British after 1891 war.

From the existing literary accounts it can be seen that the women has occupied a respectable position. The women are charming, lovelorn, and romantic. *Panthoiba Khongkul* is the story of one such love between a married princess and a prince from another place, who eventually elope with her new lover. But like other tribes and communities, the patriarchal structure remains dominant. L. Basanti opines that many literary texts suggest the role played by the women in political, economic, social, religious, and cultural life suggests their important place in the decision making role.
The names of Yabirok, Lisana, Nungshengshu and queen Linthoingambi have been immortalized in the chronicles for their outstanding decision making qualities. However, they are not the rulers, as that position can only be occupied by a male. According to Basanti no other women in the history of India has enjoyed as much freedom and power as that of a Manipuri women. It seems that except going to war, all other activities like religious ceremonies, court activities, agriculture, handicraft etc are taken care of by the women folk (Basanti). However, despite of such important dispensations the Meitei women “were denied right to property, which was a great indicator of the status of the women in a given society” (Basanti 164). Apart from that there have been considerable influences of the Hindu culture, Ramayana and Mahabharata in the Manipuri society, as they have many texts that rearrange the stories from the mythologies.

Arunachal Pradesh is the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency of India (NEFA) and has remained a protected area like Nagaland where an outsider needs an inner-line permit to enter. It is the home of many indigenous tribes which have been at war with each other before they are brought under the regular administration. These tribes have different social structure and the area has been sparsely populated. According to the 2011 census, Arunachal Pradesh has the lowest population density of 17 per square Km in India (C. S. Rao 524). Some of the important tribes of this region as pointed out by Verrier Elwin are Daflas (living in east of Kameng), Tagin and Gallongs (in the north, they are also known as Hill Miri), Apa Tanis, Adi, Mishmis (of Lohit division and are divided into three sub-tribes: Indus, Taraons, Kamans), The Wanchos (of Tirap division), the Noctes (they are also from Tirap division, and they have come under Vaishnav influence and hence has lost much of their traditional
culture) and the Singphos. According to Elwin, the myths of this region have come under external influences which can be evinced from the absence of the common motif found in other Indian folklores. “A very few myths show traces of missionary teaching… there is occasional echo of the Ramayana; one Singpho myth is based on a Jataka tale… (Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* xx)”. The myths reveal the nature and mentality, character and the social structure of a particular tribal community, and the myths from Arunachal Pradesh tribal people usually place the women as vulnerable, but good, in most of the creation myths. Tilottoma Mishra is also of the opinion that female characters from this tribal world has been represented by writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohainbarua and Jyotiprasad Agarwala as epitome of “innocence, natural grace and simplicity” (Misra 225). There are instances of women being forced to marry, or being kidnapped or being forced to have sex with the men. All these are a part of the myth which kindles the desire to populate the land. It becomes apparent that the will of the male persists whereas, the female’s wish or opinion is not counted always. In the creation myth, both men and women occupy important parts. There are myths related to both men and women and an attempt has been made to explain many aspects of the nature of human beings, though unrealistic. There are many myths related to the incestuous relationships between men and women. Elwin cites one instance where the girl is forced to marry the brother:

> It was obvious that such traditions would rise the problem of incest, for the first man and woman are often represented as being brother and sister…in a Dhammai story, at the beginning of the world the first brother and sister came together to produce the human race…In an Idu Mishmi story, the parents of the first boy and girl decide that, since there are no other people in the world,
they will have to marry each other. The girl tries to escape, but in the end she is compelled to marry her brother and, in due course, gives birth to a tiger and a god in human form (Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* 97).

The Arunachali tribes are polygamous in nature as has been pointed out in the autobiography of Verrier Elwin elsewhere in this research.

The use of language in literature is a very interesting facet in Arunachal Pradesh. Because of its close proximity with Assam, the writers like Lumer Dai and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi have used Assamese as their medium of creative endeavor. On the other hand, Mamang Dai and L W Bapu use English as their medium of literary expression. Lumer Dai and Thongchi often deal with social and family issues in their works and the issue of women’s emancipation also finds a strong foothold in their works. Social evils like child marriage and bride-price (the father actually sells off the daughter for the bride-price sometimes to her disadvantage) are some of the issues in the tribal societies caught in the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity. Misra says, “In the village Kebang which is traditionally dominated by the elder males, women being in a marginalized position, the voice of the youth gradually makes itself heard (Misra 230).” There is an Idu Mishmi proverb, which says, “Aru Pe Gu Noyu-Mbo Mi”. This implies that “women are like anchorless boats which move easily, even with the slightest stir. It is this logic that projects women as unsuitable in positions of power (Aich).” The present day writers are consciously breaking away with the social structure which dominates women, and the youth of today are taking the lead. This issue is further discussed in chapter six.

Like the Manipuris, the Tripuris have also suffered from the historic fallacy committed by the royal family. The Kokborok language has got little support, and one
can sense a Bengali cultural imperialism dominating the scene. Chandrakanta Murasingh opines that “Since the near-naked hill people of the princely state, who practiced jumming (shifting cultivation), and the poor subjects of the state spoke in kokborok language, the Maharajas of the state, sitting on the octagonal throne held up by a lion, felt ashamed of speaking in the same language (Murasingh 278).” The kokborok language just relegates to the use of ordinary people who live in the hills and forests.

Like most societies in the mainland India, the Tripuri society has also come under the fold of Hinduism and has taken impetus and inspiration from the Hindu mythologies and from Christian scriptures. The reason for this claim is that the Kokborok myths and folklores present the position of women from a misogynistic point of view. One of the famous folktales, ‘Kherengbar Bubar’ is a retelling of the ‘original sin’ that has caused Adam and Eve to lose the paradise, but with a different touch. Whereas, the Old Testament tells us how Eve causes Adam to eat the forbidden fruit thereby losing the right to live in paradise, the Kokborok version has a flower whose fumes are not to be smelled, but the erring wife smells it and thereby loses the right to be human anymore: the husband and the wife turns into hoolock and lizard respectively. The lizard is akin to the serpentine nature of women, and the hoolock gibbon is the primitive version of man himself. Thus the story can be interpreted as a retraction of mankind due to the fault of a woman. Knowing the danger of smelling the flower, the wife cajoles her husband to pluck it for her; and despite of his warning she smells it bringing the curse on the family. This also shows the vulnerability of men who are controlled by the women; a story similar to the Naga story about the ‘dao’ discussed earlier in this section. A similar folktale Woodpecker
also tells us about the power of women over men. All these myths have been created in the Tripuri society with the intention to subjugate women to an inferior position and to curtail their power and voice.

Sikkim is a new addition to the group of North-East region. It is a small and exotic state with three communities: Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali, the last constitutes 56% of the total population according to the report published by National Commission for Women\textsuperscript{41}. The report published by NCW states some of the gender discrimination against the womenfolk:

…women empowerment is still an eye-wash in the state; women still face unequal opportunities in a variety of spheres- A woman is considered to be an asset in the household and commands a bride price but she has no rights of inheritance…If Sikkimese women married a person, who is not a Sikkim subject holder the husband and off spring born of that marriage shall acquire no interest in any immovable property…Women still remain largely involved in traditional and unpaid or meagerly paid economic activities mostly as agricultural labors and lower rung of other activities as well … Girls are typically denied the opportunity to pursue higher studies / education since it often involves moving out of the villages, districts and even the state. Socio cultural and family considerations often deny women the opportunity to pursue employment outside the state\textsuperscript{42}

In one of her unpublished papers, Sanchita Ghatak mentions about the prevalence of bride price as a tradition among the Bhutias. This further illustrates the problem that has already been explored in relation to other tribes, and any further explication will seem repetitive. Whereas, the Lepchana woman is denied property rights and also the rights to inherit by customary laws, the prevalence of polyandry in
this society is an exceptional issue like some of the Arunachali tribes. Sancita Ghatak makes an important observation of the woman’s rights to select her husband, even though it is a patriarchal society, and women have no property rights, she is not subjugated. She is denied rights equal to men, but she has freewill to choose her partner:

After the negotiation for marriage, there is a custom that the would-be husband will stay in her father-in-law's house for one to two years when he will give free service to them. If they are satisfied and think that he will be able to keep their daughter properly, then the marriage will be settled (Ghatak).

Assam is the home of many tribes and communities, each with their own myths and folklores. The history of Assam is linked to the great past of Bharata through her presence in the epic Mahabharata. Two names occur in the Mahabharata that link the Assamese women with the rest of the Indian women are the names of Rukmini and Usha. Whereas, Lord Krishna came to marry Rukmini, King Bhismaka’s daughter; Lord Krishna’s grandson Aniruddha came to marry Usha, the daughter of King Banasur. The history also celebrates the exploits of heroic Assamese personalities like Sati Jaymati, Sati Sadhani, Mula Gabharu and Ramagabharu as pointed out by P.D. Saikia, K. Gogoi and Anjali Lekharu in their book Indian Rural Women. The contribution of the Assamese women in the past and also during the freedom movement (Kanaklata and Bhogeswari) are undoubtedly commendable; however they are, like the other women in India, who have been subjugated by the patriarchal society from time to time. Praphulladatta Goswami observes:
The bride is tender, does not know how to do anything, she is the pet of everyone in the family, and her parents worry that she may have to hear hard words at her mother-in-law’s house. She is a beauty like Sita and she is often compared to Rukmini and it is Krishna of Dwaraka who comes to marry her.

This is idealization; on the other hand we find the able Assamese girl who know how to spin and weave, dance and spin and even help her husband in the battlefield… (P. Goswami 17-18)

This is a very much gendered opinion seen through the patriarchal lens, justifying the dual role of women. When Mahatma Gandhi has visited Assam in 1921, he has written in his periodical *Young India* after going back to Gujarat: “And, of course, I fell in love with the women of Assam. They are like women all over India- shy, modest with extremely refined and open faces (P.D. Saikia).” This is a typical image of the Assamese women that has been presented in books, literature and also in society.

Assam is the home of many indigenous like the Tiwas, Karbis, Bodos, Mishings, Rabhas, Garos, and Chutias and others. For the sake of convenience, a brief discussion on the position of women in the Karbi and Bodo society has been made in this research.

Anil Bodo is of the opinion that although the Bodo society is a patriarchal one, the women are not subjugated. He cites Sidney Endle’s word ‘matriarchate’ to show the better position of women in a Bodo society when compared to other tribal societies. Although the Bodo society has been animistic in the past, with the process of sanskritization, some of the population has been converted into different sects of Hinduism as pointed out by Birendranath Dutta in his essay, and others have taken recourse to Christianity. The Bodo community has a very rich gamut of literary stock
which includes folktales and folksongs. The female is highly respected in the Bodo society and is considered as an important person in the domestic sphere. The sanctity of the household can be maintained alone by the women, that is why the Bodos seek ideal wives, unblemished by vanity. One may have heard of the famous proverb, “like father, like Son”, which as an Assamese equivalent both literally and metaphorically: “bapek sai putek”. However, the bodo society has a complete opposite proverb: “bima zoloi phica” (Like mother like daughter) (Bodo 207). Great importance is given to the household discipline and the women play important role in that. No doubt the males are protective about the females in a Bodo society which becomes evident from the restrictions imposed on Bodo women as cited by Aparna Mahanta: “It may be mentioned in this connection that the Bodo Sanmilan had forbidden women to go to the market and other public places as they were wont to do as a part of a Sanskritisation process” (Mahanta 55). Dakheswari Brahmani, the first among the Bodo women to have passed M.E. School, urged to her fellow Bodo men to allow Bodo women to go to school and colleges for the betterment of the community (Mahanta 55). Another proverb indicates the importance of learning household work by the Bodo women: “okha khorom naya harona, hinzao kharonnaya bhaba rona” (Thunder does not lead to rain. The girl who enters the household of the husband off hand does not do any work.) (Bodo 209). Anil Bodo points out the legends of Gambiri Chikla, Birgachri Chikla, and Chandramali and Kathai Budan. Whereas, the first two has been immortalized for their valor, courage and indefatigable strength; the latter has been know in the history for her freedom of spirit but eventual acceptance of the role of a dutiful wife. The story of Chandramali implies the freedom that a woman can exercise to choose the right husband. The women are not forced into subjugation; but
like all patriarchal societies, the Bodo society too has some limitations in matter of women’s emancipation. Phukan Chandra Basumatary is of the opinion that women are not allowed to take part in the traditional social practices and this relegates them into an inferior position in the society. The society is predominantly a patriarchal one and the women cannot make a space within it; she has to function according to the codes created by the men. A woman is equated with goddess Lakshmi, and is called ‘Mainao’. Basumatary cites a non-fictional work *Nono-Maidang (The Deity of Wealth)* where women are equated with wealth. It exposes the gender biasness and discrimination against women. Moreover, the women are also seen as a sexual object which becomes evinces from the proverb: “Cikha godana cantham hinzao godana dantham” (A newly bought dagger lasts only three days. A newlywed bride lasts only three months). The tales of Raona and Raoni; and Obonlaori explicitly exposes the possibility of incestuous relation and their taboos that prevail in the society. The conviction of Obonlaori by the villagers for his incestuous attraction towards his daughter-in-law shows the protective nature of the society towards the women despite of inherent weakness. The story of Raona and Raoni is the episode about the brother’s infatuation for his sister. This incestuous relationship is a taboo and parallel instances of similar folktales are also found in other tribal communities of the north-east as pointed out by Brirendranath Dutta and Anil Bodo. What is important to observe here is that, in both the stories, the females (the sister and the daughter-in-law) out rightly reject the prospect of incest and vehemently protest it.

Another noteworthy writer among the Bodos is Manoranjan Lahary who deals with the women issue. In one of his short stories, *Bandi (Slave)*, he exposes the plight of a poor girl who has been sent to work at the house of a Zaminder (Basumatary).
Most of the Bodo writers advocate the empowerment of women through education. Another important novel is *Daini (Witch)* by Manoranjan Lahary which exposes the social evil associated with witch hunting. The protagonist, Durmao is eventually convicted as a witch and is abused for her inhibition with medicine and incantation as pointed out by Basumatary. It seems, the curse of witch-hunting is the biggest impediment in the progress of women in a Bodo society, which has been discussed in the next section of this chapter.

In the Karbi Society too, the women do not fare better. There are limitations in relation to movement of the female. They are not allowed to participate, or even visit some places of worship (Katharpi). The Karbi women cannot inherit property from the father; however the Karbi women are entitled for widow remarriage and the divorce instances are almost negligible. Rongbong Terang, the renowned Karbi litterateur is of the opinion that a folk song like *Thelu Alun* reflects the primitive status of Karbi women which persists till day (Terang). This folk song portrays women as a labourer and they are always dominated by their male counterpart. In matter of marriage, they do not exercise any liberty. Terang says that the women are bonded to the family and the male in terms of slavery.

The position of women in most tribal societies discussed above show their subordinate status. According to Bascom, the myths are narrated with the conviction of truthfulness about what happened in the remote past (Bascom). Therefore the folktales are considered educative and instructive as they are drawn from the experiences from the forefathers. They are secular yet sacred. The varied customs and rituals mentioned in the myths in relation to women has further made it clear that be it tribal or non-tribal, the world view is predominantly a male one, where women are
objectified and different myths have been created to justify. In some tribes and societies, women are desperately silenced because the allowance of a female voice will disturb and upset the patriarchal structure of the society. Female voice is allowed only if it speaks the male idiom. It will not be erroneous to conclude that there is no subaltern representation, because the subject formation of the female-subject has not been allowed in the male discourse, hence what might appear as a subaltern representation is only a gimmick. The next section will deal with the issue: Then where can we find the subaltern voice?
3.3 The subaltern women

The Indian society is still ill-equipped to deal with the issue of subaltern women without causing blisters into their already existing condition. The inability is because during addressing the issue of the subaltern, their covers are blown up and they are far more exposed to the stigma attached with their subaltern position. The issue pointed out here is associated with domestic violence, female child abuse, sexual exploitation within the household and outside, and rape victims. This is the reason mostly the news of such exploitation goes unnoticed or unaddressed. Indian women are the victims in a society in many ways. The possibilities of victimization may also arise from their social conditions such as widowhood, castiesm (dalit women), witch-hunting, and police action. Most often the victims do not come out to inform such atrocities committed against them, but a careful reading of the literature exposes these subaltern women.

Rape is a tool that has been used to silence women, as a weapon for revenge, to subjugate women, and lastly to appease the sexual appetite. However, the last one is irrelevant in the context of North-east, because women are respected in tribal societies and hardly are they victim to that. Yet, rape is a recurrent theme in the contemporary literature of the North-east, because the perpetrators of such crime often take the cover of an organization: police, army, militant. It is often used as a weapon for threat, revenge and to subjugate women. In one of the short stories entitles The last Song, Temsula Ao exposes the atrocious crime committed by the Indian army to control and intimidate the Naga tribe. It has been used a tool of police action. Ao narrates the scene of rape in most moving terms:
When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach. The young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn...he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body...The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the women was already dead (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 28).

Such crime can only evoke horror and disgust in the listener or the seer. This brings to mind the infamous rape that took place in Delhi and shook the nation forcing the government to quickly legislate protective laws for women. In Easterine Iralu’s novel Vini narrates the reason for which he has become a drunkard and a violent man and the futility of Naga protest:

> Leto, haven’t you heard that they killed Lato’s mother? Put a gun into her mouth and shot her dead after they raped her. Do you know that when Lato went to avenge his mother they beat him until he was half-dead and then they released him. And no one could do anything to help him, certainly not the government (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 247)."

When crime is perpetrated by the agents of government, the people of that country become helpless in the face of such violence. During all type of war, the worst victims are the women. Whether it is during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 or the terror waged by ISIS in 2016, the weapon is same: rape. Mitra Phukan too narrates the terror lore related to rape in her novel *The Collector’s Wife*. However, this time it is not government forces, it is the militant organization that is responsible for the crime. Whether the stories are true or false are difficult to gauge, but it attains intense notoriety and soon spreads like a magnified rumor: ""There as a demand for money
some days ago. Five crores, I believe.” “The wife was raped before she was shot. Repeatedly. In front of her husband” (Phukan 26). Uddipana Goswami also narrates in one of her short stories *Colours*, how a Bodo girl, Deepti becomes a victim as she is caught between Bodo and Tea-tribe clash owing to her love affair with a boy from the tea-tribe (U. Goswami). There are such numerous rapes, which go uninformed because of the social stigma associated with it. Investigation has revealed that the incidence of rape has grown from 717 in 1997 in Assam to 884 by the year 2002, and Kamrup records the highest percentage (Sharma and Das). Uddipana Goswami’s short story also informs the readers about the conflict between the tea-tribes and the Bodos. The tea-tribes are a true class of subaltern people whose condition has not improved in past one century. Whereas, those who travelled abroad as indentured laborers are today in a high position in those societies; but the ones who came to Assam are not only lost in poverty, anonymity and deprivation; the entire community has been coerced over years with false political promises and exploitation. These people are called Adivasis today, as they have come from the tribal population of states like Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Chattisgarh and other places from different parts of India. Mulk Raj Anand has written a novel *Two Leaves and A Bud in the year 1937* detailing in fiction the life of a family with tragic intensity.

Witch-hunting is another tool to silence women. In the past few years a number of killings of women have taken place due to the superstitions believe that these women were actually witches and can cast evil spell on others. Such incidents take place only among the people who are still living in a superstitious world and ignorant from the advancement of science and deprived from education. The Famous novel in Bodo language *Daini* (witch) written by Manoranjan Lahari deals with this
issue. Pranay Kumar Aditya writes that more than 100 women are being tortured, paraded naked, or harassed annually in the state of Chattisgarh (Aditya). Chattisgarh has a high tribal population living under superstitious belief, and in Assam too, such incidence take place in rural areas and among the tea-tribes. He writes: “According to…Assam Home department…witch hunting claimed 116 lives including 66 women …between 201 to 2011 (Aditya 11)”

The true condition of the subaltern can either be traced between the lines of someone trying to represent them, or may be in the writings of others in an unspecified circumlocution, or only in their own voices and acts.

The voice of woman finds best expression when she writes her own feeling without exaggeration, and the best genre for this purpose is the autobiography, diary and memoirs. Till the publication of the diaries, very few ideas about female firsthand experience were known, since they only appeared through male narratives. But when it becomes a conscious process deliberated for an audience, it takes the shape as Gilmore says:

When a writer is seen in relation to the dominant discourses of power s/he was simultaneously inscribing and resisting, the innocence of autobiography as a naïve attempt to tell a universal truth is radically particularized by a specific culture’s notion of what truth is, who may tell it, and who is authorized to judge it. (Gilmore, Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Representation 107)

Gilmore’s accusation is true, but partially. Even though the events are narrated in an attempt to conform to the notion of truth of the totaling experience of the dominant culture, nevertheless the appraisal of a particular event, which is outside that
discourse, reveals other facets of multiple events happening simultaneously. In simple words, when Indira Goswami is writing about her experience, and at the same time she is also trying to sympathize with the victims she comes in touch with, she unknowingly narrates exposes another episode which has been left un-narrated. This is how the subaltern can be traced. For example, in her book *An Unfinished Autobiography*, the reader comes across a prostitute:

Suddenly, we were startled by a rustling sound from among a large clump of bushes. And almost immediately a woman emerged from behind it. My astonishment knew no bounds! She stood before us, completely naked... Almost immediately, two soldiers appeared and ran off... the women flung her cloths, and disappeared...

The three of us stood there, dazed and bewildered. Then Padmabai said in her odd pronunciation, “She works for the company. Her husband was drowned in a foundation well at the Sarengkheda bridge. She came here with the contractor. Her three children are always begging for food in the ‘langars’ (the Kitchen) of the labourers.”

Bewildered, I asked, “But what is she doing here in this jungle with the Jawans?”

“She is a prostitute”, was the reply.

“A Prostitute!” I exclaimed in shock. I had never seen a whore before. (I. Goswami 46)

The situation is completely an irony. The lady has been forced to prostitution in order to feed her children and herself after the accidental death of the husband. Indira Goswami’s husband too works for the same company, and dies in an accident.
However, Goswami moves forward in the ladder of success and eventually becomes a professor in Delhi University, by dint of her hard work and of course, because of the sound education that she has received. Nobody knows what happened to that prostitute, she is lost in the society. In the dialectic of the subaltern women, such life histories play a profound role in bringing out the existence suppressed class. The otherwise non-existent, unseen prostitute’s sudden appearance in the sophisticated world of the elite (the engineering company) unravels the vast chasm (inhabited by the subaltern) that exists in the Indian social reality. Meeta Deka points out that “In the absence of a system of lal bazaars or red light areas in Assam, prostitutes in Assam since colonial days lived not as a community within a specific geographical space, but lived in invisible pockets, singly or in groups, of the towns and the city of Guwahati… (M. Deka 107)”. The existence of this prostitute is a disgrace to this society because the national imagination (Hindu) sees the woman as a chaste (snobbish?) person who will uphold the banner of ideal woman. As Tejaswani Niranjana writes, “Women were imagined as morally pure, and thereby entrusted with the task of saving the nation (Niranjana, Nationalism Refigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism 144).” Thus the utopian world conceived by the Hindu imagination, of which Indira Goswami is also a part, can only express her utter shock when encountered with its heterotopian reality. On the other hand, the issue of prostitution, seen as the other reality of the subaltern women as highlighted by the essay of Aamir R. Mufti, has been discussed at length in this research elsewhere.

Life writing shares a common space with other branches of knowledge, namely history, sociology, philosophy, literature, polity etc. because it is human life that frames the elemental world and cannot be separated from our lives. However,
life-writing has commanded little attention hitherto and still remains an unexplored realm for students of literature. In short life-writing is the window to the past world, that world which has shaped the present world and will be responsible for shaping the future world too. Life-writing does not simply tell us about the life of the scribe because it does something more than that. It tells us about the society, the philosophies, the tenants of a period and much more as already cited in the autobiography of Indira Goswami.

The first trace of life writing can be seen in the work of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Kish, who lived 4300 years ago (ca. 2285-2250 B.C.E.). She did not write any autobiography, but her writings, hymns, and poetry reflected her life. Her works are important because she is the first poet extant to us and which shows the role of female authority. It not only gives us a picture of the society and history, culture and tradition, religion and practices, but also establishes her feminity:

In *The Exaltation of Inanna* there is a strong authorial presence that may be unmatched in ancient literary creation until the time of Sappho. She is self-consciously present in the process of writing and in the poem. The double "I" of the creatrix, Enheduanna and Inanna, are always at the center. And the hymn becomes a rhetorical creation of passionate complexity, one of death and birth, destruction and creation . . . those things that occupy the deepest part of the psyche. (Binkley, Enheduanna)

The proper autobiographical work, one of the earliest examples, that is extant in India is *Theragatha* and *Teregathi* written in Pali language. These songs are the incidents of the lives of the Buddhist nuns which uphold the cause of their conversion to Buddhism (*Theragatha: Verses of the Elder Monks*). Their stories are told with often heart-breaking honesty and beauty, revealing the deeply human side of these
extraordinary women, and thus serve as inspiring reminders of our own potential to follow in their footsteps.

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I! —
from three crooked things set free:
from mortar, pestle,
& crooked old husband.
Having uprooted the craving
that leads to becoming,
I'm set free from aging & death. (Bhikkhu.)

One can see that a Bhikkhuni frees herself from the shackles of her crooked husband, and from other attachments of mortal living thus giving us a contemporary insight to the oppression of the husband and the reason for conversion.

It is pertinent to mention “The Book” by Margery Kempe, (c. 1373 – after 1438), whose autobiography is significant in several ways. It is the first extant autobiography in English. The book can be read as a document of the social life of the medieval times. However, the book is also concerned with femininity, subjectivity and medieval Christianity. The book can be analysed from the perspective of female mysticism. But what Gilmore has said, becomes evidently true from this autobiography.

The autobiographies of the female are quite different from that of the male due to their way of perceiving the world, which is determined by their gender. Certain experiences are particular only to women writers, which is absent in male autobiographers. Therefore the gender of the writer determines the pattern of the biography. But what if the autobiographer is trans-sexual as in the case Orlando's
Sleep: An Autobiography of Gender by Jennifer Spry (John)? In this connection I would like to mention that the autobiographies of lesbians and homosexuals also play a very important part. Since they are a part of our society, and is against all odds, their experience and feelings is essential to make a study of the societal structure. A very important autobiography in this category is The Fun House: A Family Tragicomedy by Alison Bechdel.

The ethnic background also influences his/her writings. One may come across numerous instances in history which show that the boys were presented as independent, and authoritative; the women were dependent on the fathers, and husbands, and were expected to submit themselves humbly. Although, these kinds of stereotypes could be seen ample in literature, we can see the voices of women speaking for themselves, sometimes narrating their lives within the social convention, sometimes moving out of the accepted norms of the society. Although the best way to express the feelings is writing an autobiography, which is a little less fantastic than a novel, since the primary base is supposed to be truth of life, but till the recent times women have less opportunity to express themselves freely. That is, they express themselves in a way acceptable by the society. But can the women speak beyond the accepted norms decided by the patriarchal order for them?

There are hundreds of women writers from India, China, Japan and other parts of the world who have reflected their lives as well as the society in their works. Again coming back to Indira Goswami’s autobiography, she not only narrates the events of her life threadbare, but also gives us a picture of the widowed women living the fag end of their lives miserably in Brindaban. The crisis in the lives of the widowed women, the pain and cruelty endured by them for no mistake of their own, is
presented in quivering terms under the garb of realism. These widows live in little
dingy cells under unhygienic conditions and earn the crumbs to sustain the miserable
lives by singing the bhajans. But the holy site offers no refuge to them free of cost,
and they even have to make financial arrangements so that they get the right cremation
after their death, with the expectation that they will go to heaven if properly cremated.
What is more pathetic is that these widows either rot on the streets or are thrown to the
Jamuna River after their death (I. Goswami 129). Their widowhood is equal to death
and some are even subjected to molestation. Thus her autobiography is a powerful
objection to the treatment of widowed women in India under a pseudo-chauvinistic
patriarchal society.

In the beginning of her autobiography, Ms. Goswami cites the two instances of
recorded Sati system that has taken place in Assam. Her compassion for her fellow
human beings often moves her to tears when she is listening to the scriptures.
Goswami is of the opinion that in this patriarchally structured world, women are
helpless without the male protection, as she has experienced in her life after the death
of her father, then uncle and at last of her husband Madhu. At times she can
sympathize and at times she can empathize with the condition of the wretched people
that she sees around herself. She tries to derive her power and inspiration by writing;
but at times her subalternity that arises from her gendered situation pushes her to the
verge of committing suicide. She has realized that the justification of living is not in
itself, but is in living for others. She goes on living among the subalterns, with her
husband, then without her husband and gradually brings out the subaltern condition of
the poor and the weak, the famished and the deprived, the prostitute and the widowed
in her many novels. The autobiography has received universal acclamation, but how
far the exposed truth and the reaction of that truth penetrated the ethics of the society is doubtful. She has lived among the subalterns.

There are numerous examples to prove the fact that autobiographies are powerful documents remaking history with its black and white shades. Great philosophies, prejudices and the making of nations are revealed through Life-writings. For example Hitler writes a letter to Herr Gemlich in September 16, 1919:

…..antisemitism is too easily characterized as a mere emotional phenomenon. And yet this is incorrect. Antisemitism as a political movement may not and cannot be defined by emotional impulses, but by recognition of the facts. The facts are these: First, Jewry is absolutely a race and not a religious association. Even the Jews never designate themselves as Jewish Germans, Jewish Poles, or Jewish Americans but always as German, Polish, or American Jews. Jews have never yet adopted much more than the language of the foreign nations among whom they live. A German who is forced to make use of the French language in France, Italian in Italy, Chinese in China does not thereby become a Frenchman, Italian, or Chinaman. It's the same with the Jew who lives among us and is forced to make use of the German language. He does not thereby become a German. (Hitler, Adolf Hitler's First Antisemitic Writing).

Hitler very shrewdly tries to prove his hypothesis with his prejudiced opinion. One of the victims of Hitler’s atrocities was the family of Ann Frank. The killings of the Jews in concentration camps are too gruesome and historically too well known fact to be repeated. But if we go through the pages of the diary of Ann Frank, we can behold the historical episode. Let us see what Anne Frank, a thirteen year old girl watching the atrocities of Hitler with her innocent eyes, writes in her diary:
Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees: Jews were required to wear a yellow star; Jews were required to turn in their own bicycles; Jews were forbidden to use trams. (Frank 15)

Fine specimens of humanity, those Germans and to think I’m actually one of them! No, that’s not true. Hitler took away our nationality long ago. And besides, there are no greater enemies on earth than the Germans and the Jews. (Frank 73)

One gets a clear picture of the holocaust, the crisis created by Hitler. No other history can more accurately present the occurrences more graphically other than Ann Frank’s diary. The victim has to be Vocal. The victim must speak out. And this is perhaps the reason why James Dewey Watson Whites says Whites produce biographies and blacks produces autobiographies. This is true especially when we talk about Slave Narratives (autobiographies). The argument can be substantiated by citing Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs deals with slavery as a social evil and how women vis-à-vis men were treated in the 19th century. One statement by Jacobs perhaps will illustrate the case in point when she writes in her book, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women (Jacobs 294)” She states that slavery is worse in a woman’s case than it is in case of a man mainly due to the tenets of gender identity. Jacobs highlights the differences between the societal norms for the 19th century women. The expectations from women were four-fold: piety, purity, domesticity and obedience. This is indicative of the gender inequality. In her contemporary Fredrick Douglass, we see the same atrocities of the
 Whites. He emphasizes on slavery as an evil; and his attempts to retain his dignity and win freedom. The importance of education is more emphasized in Fredrick’s autobiography. Both these slaves narrate the wretched condition of the slaves in America.

Since social background dictated by religion often becomes the cause of women’s subjugation, may women finding opportunities free themselves from that surrounding; while women prefer to fight from within the system. Indira Goswami’s Autobiography is a contrast to the first Autobiographical novel Saguna, written in 19th Century by Krupabai Sathianadhan. Sathianadhan’s family is the first Brahmin family to convert to Christianity, and thus this position enabled her to pursue her career and life freely (Gope). Sathianadhan uses her religion as a tool to fight the social odds pitted against a woman by the Hindu society. Her novel starts with a convincing announcement:

In the following pages, I shall in my own way try to present a faithful picture of the experiences and thoughts of a simple Indian girl, whose life has been highly influenced by a new order of things- an order of things which at the present time is spreading its influence to a greater or lesser extent over the whole of our native land (Satchidanandan, Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life 19).

Although the novel more or less looks like a propaganda which can be seen in novels written in English in Assam as well as discussed earlier, however it has its contextual relevance. The question arises why people converts? The religious subjugation imposed by the society and the patriarchal domination endorsed by the religion becomes unbearable for the people which lead to their conversion. The ‘new
order’ which is referred in the novel, is the order set by the Christian world. Christian societies are also patriarchal societies, they do not change the structure of the society, but only offers momentary relief. However, people are swayed by the new order momentarily and try to improve their immediate situation. Many writers and artists have converted to this new order, like Michael Madhu Sudhan Dutta, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati and others. Some have even converted to other faiths like Kamala Das to Islam; Bhimrao Ambedkar to Buddhism. Finding an alternate of the present situation is not always the alternate; rather solving the problems in the current situation and adopting it to one’s situation and requirement should be the alternate option. This sounds familiar to what Hamlet has been pondering on in his soliloquy, to be or not to be. Writers and activists, and even the chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution has had to take resort to conversion, such have been the atrocity of religious incursion, the kind of which is noteworthy in North-east India. Women in this process are double-crossed: firstly, for having belonged to a marginal community; secondly, for having being women. The aforesaid historical flaw takes place irrespective of time and place.

**Endnote**

1 Immolation of the wife on the funeral pyre of the deceased husband.

2 The colonized have came to realize their ambivalent position as they have been removed from their own past. In the words of Albert Memmi, "The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and the community." (Memmi 91). The process of how it has occurred is further explained in the next footnote.
The argument is derived from what Partha Chattarjee has discussed in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments*. At first Chatterjee shows how the multiple voices are repressed in an attempt to create a homogenous history; and for the sake of convenience how historical periods are divided into the periods of Hindu, Muslim and Christian rule. Chatterjee cites Tarinicharan’s *Bharatbarser Itihas*, to show that European Indology has already debunked the myth of Indian History: “All Sanskrit sources that are now available are full of legends and fabulous tales; apart from the *Rajatarangini* there is not a single true historical account.” The criteria of the true historical account had been, of course, set by then by European historical scholarship.” (P. Chatterjee 95). Thus, Tarinicharan while writing the *Bharatbarsher itihas*, (Indian History) way back in 1858 has only been conforming to the oriental discourse, by dismissing Mritunjoy’s Rajabali which has been published in 1808. Rubbishing Mritunjoy’s dynastic lists, Tarinicharan writes, “European historians have proved by various arguments that the battle of Kurukshetra took place before the fourteenth century B.C. For a long period, after the battle of Kurukshetra, the historical accounts of India are so uncertain, partial and contradictory that it is impossible to construct from them a narrative.” (P. Chatterjee 96). Thus, the evidence that Tarinicharan derives from the orientalist scholarship becomes kernel to the full narrative of nationalist history. And finally we have this: In ancient times, when virtually the whole world was shrouded in the darkness of ignorance, the pure light of learning shone brightly in India. Today, we find Hindu women treated like slave, enclosed like prisoners…But if we look a millennium and a quarter earlier, we will find women were respected….where was child marriage then?” (P. Chatterjee 97-98). Thus, Partha Chatterjee concludes that the Nationalists started considering Ancient
India as the Classical age, and the period between the ancient and contemporary as the dark age of medievalism, and all these seem to be endorsed by the European historiography. So the Europeans, and the Indian version of the Europeans, recommended such books in the Indian classrooms like: Alexander Dow’s *History of Hindostan*, first published in three volumes between 1770 and 1772, James Mill’s *History of British India*, Elphinstone’s *History of India*, Henry Elliot’s *The History of India as Told by Its own Historians*; and of course Edward Gait’s *History of Assam*.

4 According to Anne Norton, “Imperial dominion extends in time as well as in space. The establishment of empire requires the colonization of time, the rule of memory” (ibid 453); therefore to shed off that burden pushes one to ambivalent positions: “Historians educated in the metropole, in the conventions of their colonizers, found the literary forms of imperial history more difficult to shed than their content.” (Norton, Ruling Memory 458)

5 Sanjib Barua refers to the plurality of civil societies that exist in India, in consonance to what Gramsci has said. (S. Baruah)

6 Sanjib Baruah points out that along with the alienation of the region, the identity has also been made diminutive. Assam has been treated for long as the frontier of Bengal, and at one point of time Bengali has been imposed as the court and official language in Assam, reducing Assamese language as a mere dialect (S. Baruah, India Against Itself 38-39). The region has been devoid of development and progress. These and many more issues led to the militant problems as pointed out by Sanjib Baruah.

7 Quoted from the King James’s Bible (James)

8 Quoted from International Version of Bible (Bible)
Subaltern Studies is the conversation on the subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian Historians, which were eventually published by the Oxford University Press, New Delhi with eleven volumes to its credit and edited by Ranajit Guha (the actual design was only for three volumes, but its success led to the addition of eight successive volumes) (Ludden 1).

In her Key note address entitled, The Subaltern and the Popular: The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak admits that when she first used the word subaltern, she has not read Gramsci, and she meant subaltern as an exchangeable word with people, which was the name of the differential space. However, later on she has come to mean subaltern as a position without identity. (G. C. Spivak, The Subaltern and the Popular)

Robert J. C. Young in his Postcolonialism A very Short Introduction raises this question of difference between the west and the non-west.

The term ‘North-east’ is a form of geographical, linguistic and ethnic stereotyping that clubs together eight disparate, often misunderstood states that happen to lie in the North-eastern periphery of the Indian union. In no local language does such a term exist. To say that the North-eastern states are different from the rest of India in almost every way is to state the obvious, but it is important to recognise that these ‘differences’ have created rifts, giving rise to insurgencies, demands for secession from the Indian state and years of internal conflict and discontent. To the people of the North-east their world is central to themselves; to ‘mainland India’ it is a borderland. Locating a region by placing oneself at a point one sees as the ‘centre’ is both arrogant and potentially dangerous (Gill).
Marx observes, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidiere for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 18511 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle.” (Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire 10) A parallel can be drawn in the case of India where the people were exploited and oppressed by colonial rulers and later on by the native rulers. This also brings to the mind the often quoted speech by one of the Indian freedom fighters, Bishnu Prasad Rabha: Deshe acchey duti patha, ekti kalo ekti shada. Desher Jodi mongol chao, duti patha key boli dao.

In a letter dated July 10, 1827 and addressed to His Lordship-in-Council, David Scott earnestly solicited that he be pleased to adopt “as soon as convenient such further measures as may be requisite to afford to the Garos instruction in Christian religion as constituting, independently of other instruction, by far the most feasible and efficacious means of humanising that race of people and affecting the objects which Government has all along had in view in regard to them”. (Verghese 21)

By Article 2 of the treaty of Yandaboo (24 February 1826) the King of Burma, Bagyi-daw, ‘renounced all claims’ upon, and promised to ‘abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies (Barpujari 4).

“It was 28th February 1793, Geiger Ensaiswood and John Peter Bawdy, the emissaries of British officer Capt. Wales entered into an agreement with the Ahom Monarch Gaurinath Singha to initiate commercial activities inside Assam. The commercial activities initiated by the above British representative ran smoothly. The British Governor General Lord Amherst declared counter offensive against the "Burmese" invader who already encroached Assam and later tried to do so in the
British territory. As a part of this counter offensive operation, David Scot, the British agent of North-East Frontier arrived in Cachar area of Assam and distributed pamphlets, which contained the text "we further declare that we are not led into your country by the thirst of conquest. But are forced in our defence to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us. You may therefore rest assured that we will never consent to depart until we exclude our enemy from Assam and re-establish that country, a government adopted to your wants and calculated to promote the happiness of the people of all classes." However the British signed the infamous Yandaboo Treaty on 24th February 1826 with the Burmese General after defeating and chasing away them from Assam. And then, promising all kinds of happiness, prosperity and peace, above all 'to form a government of their own choice', the British occupied Assam. The refusal to fulfil the promises of David Scot led the broad Assamese people to rebel for independence under the leadership of Dhananjoy Gohain, Pioli Phukan, Gomadhar Kowar etc. prior to the commencement of biennial anniversary of the Yandaboo Treaty. Though their attitude was limited towards the goal of independence, it was a symbol of the aspiration for independence. The first rebellion started in April of 1826 and the second one on 25th March 1830” (ULFA).

17 British Companies and planters took over large parts of land in the Tinsukia-Dibrugarh area. The Motoks who were dispossessed received little or no compensation in return. (S. Hazarika, Rites of Passage 42) Under the terms of the 1826 Treaty of Yandaboo, Burma dropped all its claims on Assam and the state became a protectorate of the British…. As a result of this takeover, the Ahoms lost their lands and influence.
The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed on January 31, 1980 by Isak Chisi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S.S. Khaplang opposing the ‘Shillong Accord’ signed by the then NNC (Naga National Council) with the Indian government. Later, differences surfaced within the outfit over the issue of commencing a dialogue process with the Indian Government and on April 30, 1988, the NSCN split into two factions, namely the NSCN-K led by S S Khaplang, and the NSCN-IM, led by Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (SATP).

Phrase used by Sanjoy Hazarika in ‘Strangers of the Mist’.

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The Miyahs from the old Mymensingh district of the former East Pakistan who first worked as sharecroppers and then as tenants finally acquired rights, illegally, over the traditional lands governed by British-made laws that banned non-tribals from acquiring in any form or shape, land which belonged to the tribals. (S. Hazarika 45-46)


Ibid. 248

Ibid. 90
26 Rushdie talks about it in his essay *Imaginary Homeland*.

27 Aijaz Ahmed talks about it in his book *In Theory*. (Ahmed 77-78)

28 Rushdie’s coinage for the inclusion of Indian feelings, expression and culture to the Indian English.

29 Published in the Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India (Dutta-118-127)

30 Twelve women bare themselves in public as a protest in Manipur against the rape of a Thangjam Manorama by the Indian army personals (Bhonsle). The baring of Sojourner Truth in a public meeting as cited by Bell Hooks in her essay *Black Women and Feminism* (Hooks)

31 Margaret Ch. Zama’s essay on Mizo Literature identifies it as the first Novel.

32 A book review on the novel is available in the Seven Sister’s Post (Tochhawng)

33 According to Patricia Mukhim, “In Khasi society, the youngest daughter (ka khatduh) is the custodian of ancestral and parental property, and not an inheritor as some would like to believe…In fact, the trend has always been to give a share to the clan/family property to sons, also. In fact it is the urban middle class educated elite which has no problem about altering the matrilineal status and adopting traits of patriarchy in respect of taking the father’s surname instead of the mother’s etc. (Mukhim, Myths, Tradition and Identity 189)

34 According to Tilottoma Misra there are more than 25 major tribes (Misra 219)

35 Verrier Elwin’s Introduction to his book *Myths of the North-east Frontier of India* (xiv)

36 Adviser for Tribal Affairs, North-East frontier Agency, India.
According to Elwin, the Apa Tanis are a contrast to the Hill Miri, where as the latter are puny and have been fighting the cruel forces of nature; the former lives in the beautiful plateau and has dominated and controlled nature by their genius.

According to Elwin, Siang is the happiest of the NEFA Divisions and is the home of bright colours, lovely weaving, dancing, singing, and enchanting people formerly known collectively by the Assamese word ‘Abor’, which means independent, but who now calls themselves Adi or hillmen.

The story is cited by Chandrakanta Murasingh in his essay.

In fact, Keherengbar flower has no smell; but on touch it causes itching and eruptions on the skin. The story serves as a warning against use of flower (Murasingh 282). Murasingh obviously overlooks the gender biasness that is inherent in the story. This story also reminds one of the Chaucerian Nun’s Priest’s Tale, that the advice of a woman often leads to catastrophe.

The brutal rape of 23 year old Jyoti Singh on a moving bus by six men (BBC)

The term has been used by Michael Foucault and Satish Deshpande makes use of it in his essay. (S. Deshpande)
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